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ABSTRACT

Most U.S. institutions require international students to meet a minimum English proficiency test requirement for admission to the institution. The language requirements for admission appear to be the same for technical and for academic students. Standardized English proficiency tests purport to be non-specific; yet an analysis of the items on a widely used test showed that the majority of the items referred to materials of an academic nature. This involves a problem for English for Special Purposes (ESP) training programs, which provide training in a register of English that is not necessarily academic. Three points must be considered in relation to this dilemma: (1) to avoid preparing students to participate in a program to which they cannot gain admission, ESP programs must prepare students to take the required non-specific tests; (2) while proficiency test scores can predict success in technical programs, they should not be the sole criteria for evaluating a student's readiness to enter technical training; and (3) English programs providing preparation for technical training at U.S. institutions cannot survive without acknowledging the dual nature of their commitment to students, to prepare them for admission to the university as well as for participation in the technical program. (Author/AMH)

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English for Technical Training (ETT) and EAP Testing

Most U.S. institutions require all international students to meet a minimum proficiency test requirement regardless of the discipline the student wishes to pursue. Thus, the language requirements for a "hands-on" technical program are apparently the same as those for an academically-focussed degree program. This apparent lack of discrimination raises a number of issues which are addressed in this paper: (1) the academic slant of most English proficiency tests, (2) the variation among institutions regarding minimal acceptable scores, (3) the correlation between language learning ability and the success of students participating in technical training programs, and (4) the viability of ESP programs whose students are faced with the prospect of standardized English proficiency tests.

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ENGLISH FOR TECHNICAL TRAINING (ETT) AND EAP TESTING

by

Michael V. Regan and Gregory A. McCoy

Imagine if you will for a moment that we are gathered here today to set admission standards for international students seeking entrance into a new university; let's call it American International University or Am. I. U. (we are very strong on philosophy at Am. I. U.) And, in addition to philosophy, a number of other courses and programs have already been set and now we must decide who may participate, what the minimal requirements for admission might be for those international students wishing to gain entrance to our various programs. Should Baking have the same requirements for admission as Auto Mechanics? Should Business Administration and Cabinetmaking demand the same academic credentials?

On the face of it these may seem to be rather silly questions and the answers may seem rather obvious. But, if we were to follow the lead of a Midwestern school and an Eastern university, we would take these questions seriously, although we may not arrive at the same answers.

In the case of the Midwestern school: Should Baking have the same requirements for admission as Auto Mechanics? The answer arrived at was "yes." The requirements for an international student seeking training in Baking are the same as those for an international student seeking training in Auto Mechanics. And we might decide this ourselves; there seems to be a certain amount of logic at work here.

In the case of the Eastern University: Should Business Administration and Cabinetmaking demand the same academic credentials? Again, the answer arrived at was "yes" and, at least in our minds, here the logic seems to

break down. The requirements for an international student wishing to pursue a degree in Business Administration are the same as those for an international student wishing to learn cabinetmaking. And this identity of requirements is not an isolated example. We know of at least two schools in our area, as further examples, which offer programs in Aviation Mechanics and degree-track courses in English literature. For international students applying at both of these schools in either program, Aviation Mechanics or English literature, the admission requirements are the same.

In any event, we aren't here today to discuss the admissions policies of our institutions of higher learning, but rather to explore a small dilemma which has sprouted, perhaps, as a result of these policies.

The dilemma we are referring to is that of reconciling the contents of an ESP program aimed at preparing trainees for participation in technical training with the goal of enabling those trainees to meet the admission requirements needed to enter the program, admission requirements which are non-specific. In other words the dilemma or dichotomy, if you will, is simply: preparation for participation and preparation for admission.

Now these may seem to be different sides of the same thing. You may say, "But surely if you have prepared your students adequately for participation, you have, quite clearly, prepared them for admission. How could you not?" Can't we assume that any trainee who is ready for participation in a program in, say, Aviation Mechanics, is also admissible to that program?

The answer to that question can be found on the lined faces of every sincere ESL administrator and teacher who has tried to develop, write, and teach an ESP program of the highest quality only to discover that the students cannot meet the admissions requirements of their prospective schools.

The reason for this is as simple as it is unfortunate. Whereas the students' training has been very specific in terms of preparing him or her to participate in a specific technical program, the admissions requirements are non-specific, and the most non-specific of these requirements is some minimal score on a standardized English proficiency test.

Now, perhaps, when we mention a standardized English proficiency test the first thing that pops into your minds (with varying degrees of fondness, no doubt) is the TOEFL. However, we are not, we wish to make clear, speaking only of the TOEFL when we mention standardized tests. We are including the MTELP, the CELT, and the host of other tests developed by institutions to determine the English proficiency of their international students. Those tests are, of course, all different; some are better indicators than others, but they all have one thing in common. They are all non-specific.

We have mentioned the term "non-specific" before and, perhaps, we should make clear what we mean by this before going on. Again, let's take the example of the Eastern university. We have discovered that their admissions requirements are sweeping in their scope. Cabinetmaking and business administration majors must fullfill the same admissions criteria. They do not differentiate between the fledgling cabinetmaker and the prospective business administrator. They do not specify. They are non-specific. And, presumably, if the university uses a standardized English proficiency test as part of their criteria for judging the admissibility of international students, the cabinetmaker and the business administrator would have to achieve the same minimal score.

Now if the standardized proficiency test is non-specific, (this tells us what it is not), what is it then? General comes to mind first, but this is not quite accurate. If we were to say general , we would have to look for general items on the test. We would expect to find the various lexical

and syntactic items which occur generally in everyday communication. For example, "How much is it?"; "How much was it last year?"; "How much had it been before I came to the United States?" and the testee or examinee chooses a, b, c, or d and that's the end of that. General, non-specific English.

But, when we look closely at these standardized English proficiency examinations, we find that they are not very general. They may include items of a general nature (for example, At a Bus Stop, At the Pharmacy, Meeting on the Street, Discussing a Party, etc.), but the tenor or slant of all these types of tests with which we are acquainted is not general. It is, for want of a better term, academic.

Now let's see what we mean by this, and we have to use specific examples here, although, we reiterate, we are speaking of standardized proficiency tests, in general.

The TOEFL was chosen by us for closest scrutiny because it is the most widely used and accepted test. We chose the May, 1981 International TOEFL at random and found that in the second section alone over 80% of the items referred to materials of an academic nature. Now it may not be clear how we hung the appellation "academic" on these items, so let us take the time here to explain.

First of all, the items in this section of the TOEFL are not in any context. Therefore, it is quite possible that they could occur in general situations. But, (and these are actual items from the test), we don't think that "Sodium is the sixth most abundant element in the earth's crust," is likely to occur very often in the context of bus-stop conversation, nor that "Reindeer meat was probably one of the principal foods of Paleolithic man," would come up either. These kinds of sentences (and they are not uncommon on the May, 1981 test) are not, we think, normal bus-stop, party,

or casual-meeting fare. They are normally found, we believe, in the classroom or in some textbook. Also, the reading passages in the reading comprehension subsection have as their subject matter: zoology (2 passages), pre-historic man, banking technology, library use, geology, sociology, economics, and probability theory. In any event, this is what we mean by academic and why we do not consider this material general. This subject matter and language content may very well be appropriate for testing the language proficiency of someone planning to pursue an academic liberal arts degree, the pursuit of which might require general survey courses in diverse content areas, but what about the ESP student?

Well, when we measure the great preponderance of items that deal with campus life and obvious classroom or textbook information which occur on standardized English proficiency tests, we find that these tests favor the success of those examinees most familiar with an academic environment and with various academic subjects. This is why, as we have seen, these kinds of tests are not general. And this is why it is not only possible, but is likely, that an ESP program will prepare a trainee for participation in technical training, but will not prepare him or her for admission to the program.

Take the example of the would-be cabinetmaker. We could take him aside for 5 or 6 months and give him a very fine program in English for Cabinetmaking. He is ready to learn the how-to of tongue and groove, setting up a lathe, sanding with the grain, etc. But, unless he has also been exposed to the gamut of library procedures, readings in history, archeology, science, literature, etc., all aspects of campus life, and understands these things minimally, he is not ready to achieve an acceptable score on a standardized English proficiency test. He is not admissible. This raises serious questions concerning the viability of ESP programs in the United States, but we will come to that later.

So, to recapitulate, admissions requirements are non-specific and, when standardized English proficiency tests are a part of these requirements, the tests themselves are academic in nature. This is the first point we wish to make.

Now, if we accept that most institutions which offer technical training programs use some standardized proficiency test as an important criterion in judging the admissibility of international students, we will also find that, in spite of the apparent agreement that a proficiency test is somehow important in determining who may participate in a technical training program, there seems to be less agreement among institutions on just what a minimal score should be. In other words, the range of minimal acceptable scores is very wide.

Let's take the TOEFL again as an example. Among the schools with which we are familiar, and which offer the same technical training program, acceptable scores range from 400 to 575 on the TOEFL. And, remember, these scores are non-specific; they do not mean admission to the technical training program only. They mean admission to the school. A prospective major in English literature must, presumably, achieve the same minimal score for admission.

Now, let's consider this non-specificity in conjunction with the wide range of scores. From the point of view of the ESP program, we have already seen that it is possible (and perhaps probable) that the well-conceived and well-executed program will prepare trainees for participation, but not for admission. The ESP program concentrates on a facet of technical lexicon and rhetoric and the admissions proficiency test has a broad academic orientation. But, perhaps this point of view is too limited.

To put that suggestion in perspective, let's go back to Am. I. U. and our imaginiary admissions standards meeting. The last item we need to discuss is a minimal TOEFL score. Now there must be thousands of ways of

arriving at a decision, but, surely, our decision must be based on one very important consideration: if a student can meet our minimal acceptable score standard, then we consider that student prepared to participate in one of our programs, be it Philosophy, or Cabinetmaking, or Aviation Mechanics, or whatever. In other words, the institution has this point of view: preparation for admission implies preparation for participation.

And the wide range of scores doesn't really matter. The scores weren't determined as admissions standards to a specific technical training program. They were determined as admission standards to the institution based on the experience of the institution with their international students. And we who develop and teach ESP programs under these conditions can't realistically expect the institution to vary their standards to accomodate our students. It is we who must change our approach to accomodate the "conditions."

Various writers in ESP journals and books have written of "constraints" on courses, of the "real-world" encroaching on a theorectically-idealized ESP course design. For ESP programs in the U.S., it is obvious that we must consider another, qualitatively different constraint: the need for certain ESP programs to prepare students not only for the specific technical programs they are preparing to enter, but also for the academically-oriented English language proficiency test. These two goals, while perhaps not mutually exclusive, can certainly confound and contradict one another. Program designers must take into account this admissions constraint also, and allow for it. However, as we shall see later, we must be aware that a constraint of this type can become too constraining, too much of a strait-jacket, so much so as to take the S.P. out of ESP.

Anyway, the second point we want to make is that, to avoid doing our students a disservice, we must be aware of the institutional point of view: preparation for admission constitutes preparation for participation,

whether we agree with this or not.

Now, given that institutions accept a wide range of language proficiency test scores, is there any correlation between language learning ability as measured by a standardized proficiency test, and the success of international students participating in technical training programs? According to those who sponsor such students, and according to the institutions themselves, the answer is "yes." However, that "correlation" would appear to be based more on intuition than on any hard factual data. None of the institutions or sponsors we contacted have done a statistical analysis.

Further, this issue of correlation becomes somewhat muddied when we examine it closely, and a hard and fast correlation between scores and successful participation seemingly falls apart when we examine specific cases.

Why, then, do sponsors and institutions see a correlation between high TOEFL scores and successful participation in technical training and why do institutions insist on these scores, in most cases? The answer may be very simple. After all, while standardized proficiency tests purport to measure how well a student has mastered the language, at the same time the test also measures, to some degree, the language learning ability of that student. And language learning, at least in the case of adults, is arduous and intellectually demanding. This being the case, it shouldn't be surprising that an adroit language learner would also be an adroit learner of cabinetmaking or aircraft mechanics.

So, language learning ability, as indicated by an academically-oriented proficiency test score, can be a predictor of success in a technical training program. But, what about motivation and interest? Isn't this one of the things that ESP is all about? Heightening the motivation of our students by dealing with the very subject matter they are interested in? Can't we

say that a student who is not the least bit interested in language learning can succeed in learning aircraft mechanics because that is where his interest lies? The answers are yes, yes, and yes and no.

First of all, yes, to some degree, ESP programs are predicated on the motivation and interest of the students in the program. As has been pointed out (Strevens, 1977), the underlying raison d'etre of an ESP course is "the notion that the teaching of language can, with advantage, be deliberately matched to the specific needs and purposes of the learner... in circumstances in which the command of English being imparted relates to a specific job, or subject, or purpose."

Secondly, yes, ESP programs hope to heighten the motivation of the students by dealing with the specific subject matter the students are interested in. This seems true whether (in Widdowson's terms) the course is "ESP narrowly conceived" (for example, where course content is organized in terms of particular subject areas) or "more generally conceived" (for example, according to "frames of reference" that different scientific fields share.)

Thirdly, yes, a student who is not interested in language learning can succeed in learning aircraft mechanics, but, no, not in a second language if he hasn't learned that language sufficiently. However, ESP can serve this student very nicely for the reasons mentioned before: motivation and interest. If the language we teach him to communicative effect is the language of aircraft mechanics, then we believe it is safe to assume that his motivation will be heightened and his interest in language learning deepened. We can prepare him for participation in aircraft mechanics training.

But, have we prepared him for admission to that training? No, not if our tailor-made ESP program is of the "traditional" cut.

And this is our third point: proficiency test scores can predict success in technical training programs. Also, "traditional" ESP programs do not prepare students to achieve well on these tests.

This, then, leads to our fourth and final point: given the above difficulties that students participating in ESP programs are likely to encounter gaining admission to technical programs in the U.S., are ESP programs viable? Would it not be better to do away with ESP altogether, focusing instead on "general" English to enable the students to pass a standardized proficiency test? This of course would mean forgetting about the motivational aspects already mentioned, and the communicative purposes of the learners. It would mean abandoning the relationship, pointed out by Strevens (1977) "between how relevant a learner perceives his course to be, and how well he learns." It would mean a return to that type of "general" English whose results Ewer (1981) referred to as "so notoriously and continuously disappointing that ESP has had to be called into being."

At the opposite extreme, we could continue to indulge ourselves and our theories in implementing the more "traditional" ESP programs (English for Technical Training in this case), which may do an admirable job preparing students for the communicative tasks they will face in their training. We can teach them the lexis, the rhetorical frames of reference, and even some of the mental and physical operations required by their technical area, or technical training in general. Through cooperation with technical schools, we can involve the students in real communicative situations, involving technical classrooms, technical books or manuals, and shops and labs. And at the end of this time, we would expect them to be able to participate fully in a technical training program. But, we submit, they will not be prepared to achieve a score on a standardized English proficiency test that will admit them to most technical programs offered at

colleges, universities, or technical schools in the U.S.

Of course, these are the extreme positions, and neither seems acceptable at this point. Fortunately, there seem to be several possible options in between these two extremes.

One option is to locate ESP programs at institutions, and operate the English language training in close conjunction with the technical department or departments which would ultimately be concerned with the students. An agreement between the two training programs is presupposed, whereby students could be admitted into technical training when they had satisfied the technical departments that they were ready to participate by virtue of their ESP training. Ideally, testing instruments could be developed jointly which would test those communicative skills necessary for success in the particular technical programs in question. There is some indication that this is already taking place; several technical institutions have developed tests to evaluate potential trainees' proficiency in English, especially the type of English required for their technical program. It might even be possible for technically-specific tests to be made commercially available, in a standardized format.

Another option seems to be to operate a general English program as an adjunct to the ESP course, with greater or lesser degrees of integration and/or concentration. The most likely outcome is that both aspects of the program will suffer, because of the usually-limited length of time alloted for English training, and the necessity of trying to achieve two conflicting goals at once. However, considering the constraints on the ESP program as we have described them, this option might be the only one available to English language programs that, first of all, do not have direct affiliation with a technical school, and, secondly, do have to attempt to meet: (1) admissions standards, and (2) the demands of students for a more meaningful, motivating, and specialized English program. The difficulties of attain-

ing a "satisfactory" score on a standardized test of English language proficiency under these circumstances must be realized beforehand and concessions may have to be made concerning the amount of technical English training the students will receive.

Our fourth point, then, is this: that ESP programs, at least those which have as one constraint to prepare students to pass a standardized test of English language proficiency in order to enter a technical school, those ESP programs, are probably not viable in the form that we have come to think of as being most characteristic. At least for now, allowances must be made for preparation for standardized proficiency testing.

To summarize: We have tried to make four major points in this paper.

1. Although ESP provides training in a specific register of English, in this case technical language, admission requirements for technical programs are usually non-specific and academic.

2. To avoid preparing students to participate in a program to which they cannot gain admission, we must consider the institutional point of view, whether we agree with it or not.

3. Proficiency test scores can predict success in technical programs, though they are not the sole criteria which should be used to evaluate a student's readiness for technical training.

4. English programs providing preparation for technical training at U.S. institutions cannot survive without acknowledging the dual nature of their committment to students; ESP programs as they are most often spoken about and written about do not appear to be a highly viable life form in light of current institution admission standards.

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